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**Culture is Autonomy, Autonomy is Revolution:  
Afro-Nicaraguan Creole Women's Cultural Politics of Opacity**

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**Culture is Autonomy, Autonomy is Revolution:  
Afro-Nicaraguan Creole Women's Cultural Politics of Opacity**

**by**

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**Report**

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## **Dedication**

For my mother, Melania White.

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## **Abstract**

### **Culture is Autonomy, Autonomy is Revolution: Afro-Nicaraguan Creole Women's Cultural Politics of Opacity**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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This report explores the relationship between expressive culture and decolonial politics by taking up an analysis of contemporary Afro-Nicaraguan women's diasporic cultural production. It shows how, in the face of political exclusion and national unbelonging within the context of the Nicaraguan nation, appeals to diaspora and the counter-nationalist threat they pose may aid in securing state-granted cultural, political, and material rights for Afro-Nicaraguans. Yet, if not, they may at the very least aid in establishing a fuller sense of autonomy from the state through a symbolic alliance with the Anglophone Caribbean. This contemporary forging of diaspora is made possible through cultural production as well as through what I term a cultural politics of opacity/interiority that figures heavily in Afro-Nicaraguan women's art, and perhaps black women's art more broadly. This report suggests that it is the obscurity of opacity that makes it a radical political mechanism for social transformation, and argues that despite the eternal navigation of contradictions and neoliberal markets, Afro-Nicaraguan women artists make space in their work for the centering of black women's sexuality, pleasure, and erotic

desires for a more autonomous and liberatory future. It is precisely the illegibility of culture as politics and of the interiority of black women's erotic desires to the Nicaraguan state that enables the radical political potential of Afro-Nicaraguan women's cultural production. This report brings together scholarship on the black radical imaginary, black feminist pleasure politics, and the political mobilization of Afro-Nicaraguan women to further think through what more liberatory and decolonial visions for the future might look like, as well as the strategies that might be used to get there. I argue that a politics of opacity rooted in the intersectional experiences of black women, as demonstrated in the context of Afro-Nicaraguan women, may not only privilege the erotic as an interior and perhaps less co-optable form than the pornographic promoted and sold within larger neoliberal markets, but may be the very place from which to think liberatory politics.

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## **Introduction**

The Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, historically home to both indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, is a fraught space that was for centuries at the center of colonial power struggles and that to this day contends with the neocolonial and racist practices of the Nicaraguan state. From the moment of the colonial encounter, however, the black and indigenous communities there have resisted in a number of ways. In this essay, I focus on contemporary Afro-Nicaraguan women's cultural production and creative responses to gendered, anti-black state racism that move beyond more institutionalized political and legal means. More specifically, I examine the ways in which recent cultural production by Afro-Nicaraguan women, namely the paintings of Afro-Nicaraguan painter Karen Spencer Downs and the music performance of Afro-Nicaraguan dancehall artist Misis Francis, forms part of a larger, black feminist movement invested in a black Anglophone Caribbean identity and diasporic belonging.

This cultural movement acts as a radical refusal of state dominion over black life as it positions the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua as a sort of liminal space between the mestizo nationalist, patriarchal Nicaraguan state and an imagined black Anglophone Caribbean in which its black inhabitants can negotiate their identity and belonging. This is not to romanticize the Caribbean or overlook patriarchal state violence there, and neither is it to uncritically celebrate cultural production or overlook the ways in which culture often gets co-opted; rather, it is to examine how in instances of political exclusion or national unbelonging, identity negotiations may turn to an appeal to diaspora.



This appeal to diaspora can be aided by and often manifests through cultural production and black expressive culture more generally. I most centrally argue that what allows for this political-cultural forging of diaspora is a politics of opacity, or radical interiority, that figures heavily in Afro-Nicaraguan women's expressive culture, and perhaps black women's art and culture more broadly. The opacity I discuss throughout the essay, invoking Édouard Glissant, is one that is less about his notion of the right to difference that becomes possible through the Other's right to opacity, and more about the obscurity of opacity as a black radical political mechanism and strategy for social transformation. The discussion of black opacity as a form of black radical interiority in this essay is informed by black feminist scholarship on the black interior that understands it to be "a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination... [that] helps us envision what we are not meant to envision: complex black selves, real and enactable black power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty."<sup>1</sup> I argue it is the illegibility of this lived, or interior blackness to nation-state projects predicated on black fungibility<sup>2</sup> that grants black opacity/interiority its radical political potential.

Through an exploration of black opacity as an important tool in imagining alternative black futures, this essay asks and seeks to answer the following: what does it mean to mobilize claims towards a black Caribbean diasporic belonging for Afro-Nicaraguans—a kind of visual, sonic or embodied citizenship that could never be revoked?

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004), x.

<sup>2</sup> Shona Jackson, *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 215.

What might attention to Afro-Nicaraguan women's expressive culture elucidate about the relationship between rights and culture, particularly when it comes to imagining and engendering alternative futures? These questions speak both to the complex identity negotiations made in the wake of gendered, anti-black racism, as well as to the need for black creative or cultural spheres that allow for more radical, transformative thinking and political organizing. As I attempt to address these questions and engage opacity as central to the radical political power of black cultural production, I build off foundational texts taking up the black radical tradition/black radical imaginary that in different ways have addressed some elements of the questions I have proposed.

## Theoretical Grounding

The politics of opacity, as taken up here, is just one of Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant's key theoretical contributions. The concept appears most clearly in his 1989 text *Caribbean Discourse* and his 1997 *Poetics of Relation*. In an effort to write against the (neo)colonial impulse to know and understand the Other, Glissant advocates for a right to difference and opacity that resists reducing and exoticizing the Other. This right *not* to be understood and call to “fight transparency everywhere” is equated by Glissant with freedom.<sup>3</sup> Freedom for Glissant here likely has to do with the new humanisms that could come to fruition if the urge to know the Other is rejected. To further take up Glissant's notion of opacity as freedom, or at least as a form of freedom praxis (the emancipatory struggle towards freedom), I pair a reading of his politics of impenetrability with the work of a couple thinkers, namely Richard Iton and C.L.R. James, whose work, perhaps unwittingly, also take up a politics of opacity.

In his 2013 essay “Still Life,” Richard Iton thinks through “reflexive” black politics, especially as theorized from the point of diaspora, as an “anarranging” force with the potential to unsettle the formally political and the modernity/coloniality matrix, as well as to “enable transformative agency.”<sup>4</sup> There is something transformative to Iton about diaspora, yet he is also advocating for what I read emerging from his work as opacity. Iton invokes Chic's 1978 song “At Last I Am Free” throughout the essay, particularly the lyrics

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<sup>3</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 19.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Iton, “Still Life,” *Small Axe* 17, no. 40 (2013), 34.

“At last I am free/I can hardly see in front of me,” as a sonic accompaniment to thinking through freedom praxis as an eternal process of taking emancipatory steps. As a constant process of widening the emancipatory frame towards what freedom could look like, freedom becomes a concept and feeling that lasts only momentarily before the fog of the previous social order and/or the repercussions of emancipatory action comes down upon brief freedom visions. This fog or opacity is critical in that it guards against the dangers of the imaginary and its ability to reinforce the terms of existence, including the potential to reinforce hegemony. Iton also holds that black freedom praxis needs to challenge the aesthetics/politics binary, and at the same time use the opacity/illegibility of popular culture as politics as an advantage and strategy against both the political and the modernity/coloniality matrix that black radical politics and black freedom praxis seek to disrupt.<sup>5</sup>

In his classic text *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), C.L.R. James also troubles the aesthetics/politics divide when he takes seriously cricket as both an art form and microcosm of the raced and classed contours of Trinidadian society and the West Indies at large. Taking up cricket as an aesthetic and *thus* political form, James critiques what he calls the bourgeois, puritan code of technological rationality that refuses to see sport and other cultural forms of the masses as art and labor in favor of a popular reason rooted in the black underground countercultures of Trinidad. James does recognize, however, that it is

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<sup>5</sup> Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

precisely the tension between bourgeois codes and the popular-aesthetic imperative that gives rise to West Indian cricket and that characterizes the game.

The game's aesthetics, including negotiations between a British-imported puritan code and a counter-puritan, mass, participatory art form as well as stylistic attributes such as "cutting," all point to a sort of creolizing or transformative process that cricket underwent in the West Indies. The colonial puritan code, in its rigid perception of cricket as a form of play that works to cement the colonial nation-state project, does not value the game for its aesthetics. However, if we take James's lead about cricket as a metaphor for larger national politics, we begin to see the importance of form and aesthetics in the struggle against this technological rationality. Benjamin Graves (1998), writing about the aesthetics of resistance in *Beyond a Boundary*, accurately captures James's understanding of what style could mean politically:

The stylistic specificity of "cutting" is of some relevance here; a cut is a difficult stroke in which the batsman strikes across the underside of the ball so that it angles off to the vacant spaces behind the batsman. The point is that the shot is deliberately difficult--a gesture of mastery that serves little if any practical purpose. To James, the "cut" signifies a belligerent [sic] affront to the exigencies of colonial rule--a stylization of emancipatory ambitions.<sup>6</sup>

The opacity of both this emancipatory style and of cricket housing black, anti-colonial, and anti-state tactics, similarly to the opacity that I read emerging from Iton's work, operates as a strategy in imagining different futures beyond the political and the modern/colonial. To the extent that opacity figures heavily in black culture, we must turn to the power of

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Graves, "'Beyond a Boundary': The Aesthetics of Resistance," *Political Discourse: Theories of Colonialism and Postcolonialism*, 1998 (accessed 14 April 2017).

black cultural production and expressive culture as *opaque culture* to ascertain the strategic ways in which it challenges and works to dismantle the political and modern/colonial. In other words, and to rephrase this inquiry as a question: what insights and advantages does a black diasporic cultural politics of opacity yield in relation to challenging and dismantling the political and the modern/colonial?

To attempt an answer to this question, I examine Afro-Nicaraguan women's cultural production in response to state racism, taking cue from Glissant, Iton and James's preoccupations with diaspora, aesthetics, and opacity as central to black radical politics. I examine the ways in which Afro-Nicaraguan painter Karen Spencer Downs and Afro-Nicaraguan dancehall artist Misis Francis's work forms part of a larger, black feminist movement invested in a black Anglophone-Caribbean identity and diasporic belonging. This cultural-aesthetic movement refuses state dominion as it positions the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, formerly a British protectorate, as a sort of liminal space between the mestizo nationalist, patriarchal Nicaraguan state and an imagined black Anglophone Caribbean in which its black inhabitants can negotiate their identity and belonging, in this case forming a black Caribbean maroon identity. This form of diasporic marronage is less an attempt towards belonging and inclusion into the Nicaraguan nation and more about a strategy used to obtain national rights, to the extent that they are formally marked as Nicaraguans, as well as to establish a certain degree of autonomy from the Nicaraguan state through a symbolic alliance with the Anglophone Caribbean. The key to this rights-attainment and symbolic alliance with the Anglophone Caribbean is precisely a black diasporic cultural politics of opacity. To discuss what this sort of cultural politics makes possible it is

necessary to gauge the sociopolitical context of the Caribbean region of Nicaragua since colonial times.

## Historical background

Afro-descendant and indigenous Nicaraguans have historically inhabited the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, which was subject to competing Spanish and British rule in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The British established both control over the Coast and British slave societies in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century (1749-1787), importing black slaves primarily from Jamaica to work on plantations. After slavery was abolished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, free black West Indians came to the coast to work on banana plantations, as well as in the logging industry, among others. Afro-Nicaraguan *Creoles* are the mixed African and European descendants of these enslaved and migrant groups, and lived under regional autonomy from 1787-1844 as well as under semi-autonomous governance from 1860 until 1894 when the coast was militarily annexed to Nicaragua.

The history of the Nicaraguan nation state, like others in Latin America, includes the cementation of white supremacy, anti-black racism, and a mestizo nationalist project via the myth of *mestizaje*, which holds that due to racial mixture, the nation is homogenously “mixed” and thus represents a sort of “color-blind” racial democracy. Since the inception of the Nicaraguan nation in 1821, the Caribbean coast has occupied a counter-nationalist space within the Nicaraguan political imaginary. This is because the mestizo nationalist state, since before the military annexation of the Coast in 1894, had its sights set on the region for national development projects such as an interoceanic canal proposed as early 1860 and a railroad lining the Caribbean coast in 1904, as well as for natural resource extraction, such as in the logwood, mahogany, and lumber extraction industries. This interest in the Coast for nationalist projects continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century during anti-



imperialist national politics in the early 1900s as well as during the nationalist revolutionary period of Nicaraguan politics in the 1970s and 1980s. It has persisted into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well given that Afro-descendant and indigenous groups on the Coast continue to mobilize around land rights claims as well as for distinct cultural, political, and material rights.<sup>7</sup>

Since annexation, however, Creoles and indigenous communities on the Coast have resisted in a number of ways. Creoles, for example, participated in Black Nationalist politics like Garveyism and Rastafarianism and resisted Nicaraguan mestizo rule over the Coast, including through periodic armed uprisings, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> This history of resistance coupled with Nicaraguan national interest in the Coast has meant that Creoles have historically been referred to as foreign (read: Jamaican), counter-national outsiders to the Nicaraguan nation. To mitigate this threat, the mestizo nationalist state began an internal colonial project early on characterized by the encouragement of mestizo immigration to Coast, the implementation of Spanish language policies in schools all over the Coast, natural resource extraction, all with little to no compensation.

With the new neoliberal, multicultural regime that came about in the 1980s with the passing of the 1987 regional autonomy law for the inhabitants of the Caribbean coast, Creoles have had to navigate very carefully the ways in which they might secure distinct cultural, political, and material rights all while continuing to face perhaps even more

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<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Goett, *Diasporic Identities, Autochthonous Rights: Race, Gender, and the Cultural Politics of Creole Land Rights in Nicaragua* (PhD Dissertation: UT Austin Department of Anthropology, 2006), 107.

<sup>8</sup> Edmund T. Gordon, *Disparate Diasporas: Identity and Politics in an African-Nicaraguan Community* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 75-76, 109, 196, 251-252.

coercive forms of anti-black racism. For the purposes of this essay, here I briefly cover some of the gendered forms of anti-black racism historically reproduced by the Nicaraguan state, which has worked to perpetuate gendered, racialized tropes about the Caribbean coast and its inhabitants. One of the foremost struggles that Afro-descendent women in Nicaragua are facing, for example, is the ideological state-based reproduction of narratives about black women's supposed sexual deviance. There are three key representations of black women that are nationally circulated as outlined by Courtney Morris: 1) black women are hypersexual and thus always available; 2) black women are national outsiders, never truly Nicaraguan; and 3) black women are part and parcel of the criminality and lawlessness inherent to the Caribbean coast.<sup>9</sup> Though the latter two points are not always gender-specific as they also reflect depictions of black men, the ways in which the foreign-ness and lawlessness of Coast inhabitants is constructed has its roots in geographies of conquest modeled after the sexual exploitation of black women historically and the trope of the sexually deviant black woman.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it is the mestizo figure, more often invoked to conjure a 'mixture' between the European and Native American while leaving out the African, that has come to represent Nicaragua and most, if not all, Central and South American nations with the exception of Brazil.

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<sup>9</sup> Courtney Morris, "Conceptualizing Afro-Nicaraguan Feminism: Theory, Practice, and Praxis," *Política e identidad: Afrodescendientes en México y América Central* (2010): 9.

<sup>10</sup> See Patricia Mohammed, "Gendering the Caribbean Picturesque," *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* 1, no. 1 (2007): 1-30; Angela and Onik'a Gilliam, "Odyssey: Negotiating the subjectivity of Mulata Identity in Brazil," *Latin American Perspectives* 26, no. 3 (1999): 60-84; Vera Kutzinski, *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

This representation of the Caribbean coast as a wild, unruly, and hypersexual backwater region of Nicaragua known for its foreign blackness and immorality worked to accomplish two of the state's primary goals: 1) to mark the Caribbean coast as a backwards and black foreign space that is simultaneously part and not part of the Nicaraguan nation, and 2) to profit off of this image of the coast as an exotic black space and hidden paradise with hypersexual women and erotic festival and dance, ready to be explored and colonized all over again. The kind of celebration of the Caribbean coast on the part of the state or mestizos in the Pacific should not be confused for anything other than the re-inscription of "unequal material relations of power that (re)produce... racial and gendered subordination."<sup>11</sup> Celebrations of national diversity and of the Caribbean coast usually work towards tourism development in the region for national revenue and profit, or as a showcase for international investors to portray a good investment opportunity.<sup>12</sup>

Under this neoliberal, multicultural agenda that tends to market demands and transnational capital, anti-black state racism imposes processes of commodification on black culture for its own nationalist agenda and decontextualizes black culture as well to diminish its threat. Economic development, in this neoliberal era, is thus premised on difference. This difference is not only imposed on subaltern groups by the state; it also becomes the way in which racial-cultural groups make themselves legible and understood

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<sup>11</sup> Charles R. Hale, "Neoliberal Multiculturalism: The Remaking of Cultural Rights and Racial Dominance in Central America," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 28, no. 1 (2005).

<sup>12</sup> Goett, *Diasporic Identities, Autochthonous Rights*, 346.

by the state for true citizenship status and national belonging. In his critique of modern politics, Iton writes:

...[I]f modern narratives equate citizenship with the right to speak and perhaps compelled speech, and more broadly to be seen...it is to be expected, perhaps, that once excluded populations are superficially included...they will seek the right to make as much noise and to be seen as clearly and as often as possible as normative citizens. Indeed, the dominant narratives, one might suggest, will require the former formally subaltern to make more noise, to sing out, to desperately seek the camera, as a celebration and recognition of their supposed emancipation in a manner perhaps reinscribing the citizen/kaffir relation...If the expectation is noise and the commitment to visual ubiquity, a deeply radical politics might be correlated with aesthetic humilities, ablative disjunctions, intentional silences, hesitations, and invisibilities, among other means of confusing politics...<sup>13</sup>

Drawing from Iton's lead on the ways in which the hypervisibility of the subaltern in the liberal multicultural nation signals a superficial inclusion into the polity that ultimately reinscribes the power relations of the coloniality/modernity matrix, here I take up an analysis of the works of Afro-Nicaraguan Creole painter Karen Spencer Downs and Afro-Nicaraguan dancehall artist Misis Francis and read the decolonial opacities present in their work even as they contend with larger neocolonial, capitalist markets. I read their work as two examples of contemporary diasporic cultural politics highlighting ties to and making an active alliance with the Anglophone Caribbean for some semblance of autonomy from the state; yet, I keep in mind the ways in which they appropriate national discourses about black foreignness as a strategy for rights and belonging, all while never truly believing in the multicultural or autonomy state projects.

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<sup>13</sup> Iton, "Still Life," 38-39.

**Karen Spencer Downs and Misis Francis:**

**Afro-Nicaraguan Women's Cultural Politics of Opacity**

To situate the work of Spencer and Misis Francis as decidedly 'Caribbean' art and expressive culture, I take up a formal analysis of a 2015 painting by Spencer Downs and the 2015 song "Eso Me Tienta" and its accompanying music video by Misis Francis. I note the key formal features in both works that gesture towards a 'Caribbean' aesthetic in order to align the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua with the British West Indies. As part of my formal analysis of their work I also note the ways in which the categories of race and gender are worked and re-worked both in response to the legacy of racist representations of black womanhood by the Nicaraguan state as well as to assert a black feminist language of pleasure in the face of historical tropes about black women's inherent sexual pathology. The great care and consideration for the intersecting topics of race, gender, and sexuality in the work of Spencer and Misis Francis is not an additional critique of the state separate from the distinctly Caribbean iconography; rather, it is part and parcel of—if not completely central to—the strategic move towards a black Pan-Caribbean identity. This is because Caribbean art and culture has always had to contend with representations about itself from above, including neocolonial national and state discourses that often mark the Caribbean as a space of commodified and commodifiable blackness available for consumption.

## **The Visual Art of Karen Spencer Downs**

Corn Island-born Bluefields artist Karen Spencer Downs's work, next to that of Misis Francis, is a key site in which representations of black womanhood in Nicaragua are challenged, worked, and re-worked, as well as a site through which the Afro-Nicaraguan diasporic political project is enacted in response to gendered anti-black racism. Spencer is perhaps the second most acclaimed artist and painter from the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua next to June Beer, of Bluefields, who painted from the 1950s until her death in the 1980s. Like Spencer, Beer's paintings centered black womanhood and black livelihood on the Caribbean coast, particularly alternative representations that challenged dominant state discourses. It is no surprise that Spencer was inspired by Beer's work given that they were neighbors in the Pointeen barrio of Bluefields while Spencer was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, and that Beer would eventually become Spencer's mother-in-law. It was after Beer's passing in 1986 that Spencer inherited her paints and brushes and began to seriously paint and contribute to the visual archive of black women's history and memory on the coast that Beer had established before her.

Like Beer, Spencer's painting style is self-characterized as 'primitivist,' referencing the Nicaraguan 'Primitivista' painting movement in the 1970s, known largely for its focus on landscapes and the environment. The Primitivista painting movement in Nicaragua was a school influenced by the Haitian painting renaissance of the late 1940s and 1950s. The paintings were typified by idealized scenes of community life, lush natural environments and pastoral utopias, and were executed in bright colors and intricate detail. Of course, the larger 'Primitivism' art movement is a neocolonial, Western one that

borrows visual forms from non-Western peoples—particularly a flattened, two-dimensional style. As a so-called ‘outsider’ artist—that is, an untrained ‘folk’ artist whose work is thus considered “‘unschooled’” and “‘naïve,’” Spencer adopted the national Primitivista painting style as June Beer did before her after achieving some commercial success.<sup>14</sup> Wittingly or not, the appropriation of a national Nicaraguan painting style replaced with Caribbean imagery and black (women’s) life subverts the power of gendered (mis)representations that the state has had over the Caribbean coast for so long.

Additionally, the Caribbean landscape and geography that characterizes most of Spencer’s paintings places her work in direct conversation with Caribbean art traditions that center place and nature symbols of the Caribbean as a marker of nationalistic identity.



Figure 1. Karen Spencer Downs, *Unnamed*, 2015. Oil on canvas.

<sup>14</sup> Donald R. Hill, *Caribbean Folklore: A Handbook* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), 165.

Most of her paintings, as seen in Figure 1, feature stereotypical icons of the Caribbean, such as breadfruit, British colonial architecture, island landforms, water, and palm trees. What is particularly interesting about the Island-Caribbean setting in Figure 1 is that Spencer herself has not definitively decided if this is in Bluefields or the neighboring Corn Island approximately 40 miles away into the Caribbean Sea. In a response to a viewer of her artwork that had inquired via Facebook whether the setting was supposed to be Bluefields or Corn Island, Spencer responded that it could be either or both. This response is significant because Bluefields is not an island—it is a port city—and the sands and waters there are hardly what they appear to be in Spencer’s paintings.

This represents a visual alignment of Bluefields and the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua with the Caribbean. Yet, Veerle Poupeye notes that in Caribbean art:

...run-of-the-mill depictions of the natural environment tend often to be conventional in style and format and usually present an idealized, even stereotypical view of the Caribbean. Much of this work is mass produced in response to market demands, especially from tourism—including the standardized Haitian jungle paintings, replete with tigers and giraffes, that owe more to Le Douanier Rosseau than to the local environment.<sup>15</sup>

This reflection brings up the question of intent. Is Spencer creating a stereotypically Caribbean locale to sell, or is she affirming a rootedness in Caribbean identity for Afro-Nicaraguans? The answer increasingly seems to be both and more. In addition to the landscape, the practice of fishing, hanging clothes to dry on a line, and picking breadfruit all point to Caribbean ways of life. In other paintings by Spencer there are recurring images of fishermen, fruits, and British West Indian cultural forms like Carnival and Maypole

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<sup>15</sup> Veerle Poupeye, *Caribbean Art (The World of Art)* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998), 143.



celebrations. The colors red, gold, and green, which can be seen in the flower garden in Figure 1, are found in many of Spencer's paintings and align the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua with the Caribbean and specifically with Jamaica. Aspects of Rastafari imagery have been popularized as Caribbean iconography, and have also been popularized by the Jamaican and Caribbean tourist industry "to the point where the colours and other symbols are used on anything from beach towels and souvenir T-shirts to beer and rum bottles, with little consideration for their religious and political meaning."<sup>16</sup> While Spencer's incorporation of Rasta colors ostensibly has an intention with regard to creating a particular setting in her artworks, the question of tourism art arises once again as one wonders whether Rasta iconography is needed to mark the Afro-Caribbean locale as 'primitive' and 'authentic' in order to sell. Again, the double-voiced nature of Spencer's work comes to light.

As in Beer's artwork, an added element to Spencer's 'primitivist' style is a focus on portraiture, specifically of black women from the coast. The Caribbean iconography and appeals to a black Caribbean diasporic identity mentioned above are directly related and serve as a response to the gendered anti-black racism of the Nicaraguan state. Moreover, the patterns of black women's portraiture as well as explorations of race and sexuality that mark Spencer's work as distinctively Caribbean are the two key formal features that are directly in conversation with racist, patriarchal representations of black women in Nicaragua. These connections further the status of Spencer's works as

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<sup>16</sup> Popeye, *Caribbean Art*, 143.

Caribbeanist in nature given that Caribbean art has always had to contend with hegemonic representations from above.



Figure 2. June Beer, *Unnamed*, 1986.

Several of Beer's early paintings were self-portraits (Figure 2) in which she would turn her artist's gaze onto her subject position as a black woman. Morris argues that this process of self-painting and self-making "provided a space to reflect on her own experience, identity, and self-perception without being interrupted by an external gaze."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Courtney Morris, *To Defend This Sunrise: Race, Place, and Creole Women's Political Subjectivity on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua* (PhD Dissertation: Department of Anthropology, UT Austin, 2012), 130.



Figure 3. June Beer, *Unnamed*, 1984.

Many of Beer's paintings, such as the untitled painting dated 1984 (Figure 3), are also portraits of black women and girls who gaze back at the viewer. In Spencer's paintings, black women look directly at the viewer as seen in Figure 1, at each other as seen here,

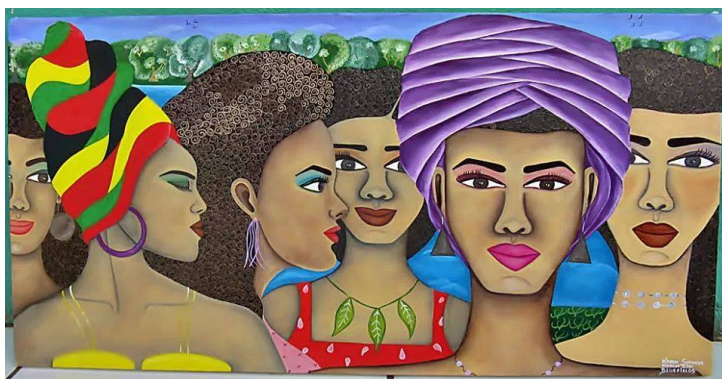


Figure 4. Karen Spencer Downs, *Unnamed*, 2014. Oil on Canvas.

or towards the Caribbean as seen here.



Figure 5. Karen Spencer Downs, *Unnamed*, 2014. Oil on Canvas.

What do these three distinct modes of looking signify, and how do they respond to state discourses about blackness and black womanhood on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua? This focus on identity and the experiences of black women through the various gazes present in Spencer's paintings is important for linking her work to the Caribbean and locating it within the tradition(s) of modern and contemporary Caribbean art where: "identity is the cardinal issue" and most works "address questions of identity from a social, political or cultural perspective..."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Poupeye, *Caribbean Art*, 159.



To conduct a close reading of Figure 1 as in response to national representations of black women and their sexualities on the Coast, I read Spencer and her work as responding thusly:



(For reference only; identical to Figure 1).

The body of an Afro-Nicaraguan woman is foregrounded, and literally mapped onto what appears to be the Caribbean coast. Her body is not fit-to-scale as it is larger-than life and covers the entire length of the painting. She also gazes directly at onlookers, almost as if to say, “if you must look towards the Caribbean coast, you must contend with my blackness and my woman-ness. The geographical representations of black womanhood you have distorted for your own national, racialized economic benefit are invalid. This is a racialized and gendered space, yes, but us coast women get to define black womanhood on our own terms.”

From the woman's afro, to her make-up, to the strap falling off her shoulder and her hour glass shape that would all appear to reify hegemonic discourses about black women from the coast if one is not careful in one's analysis, Spencer eschews all politics of respectability. Presented in Figure 1 is a self-loving black woman. In this depiction, she is 'of the land,' but not in the way black women in Nicaragua have been depicted historically. She is not necessarily licentious, lustful, and hypersexual, but a proud black woman whose beauty is not conflated or seen as one with the beauty of the landscape by the neocolonial gaze. Instead, her body mapped along the coast and by extension the entire Caribbean region of Nicaragua represents a confrontation with and necessary acknowledgment of black women's existence as real and desiring subjects with the ability to look back at the state and viewer. This confrontational, self-assertive gaze and presence both feminizes and racializes the region in opposition to the mestizo nationalist Nicaraguan state. In other words, Figure 1 and many of Spencer's paintings like it appropriates and re-works hegemonic discourses about the Caribbean coast and black women there to assert a radical difference.

This is a radical black feminist and fugitive difference invested in creating a sense of black diasporic belonging elsewhere, particularly a black pan-Caribbean one.



(For reference only; identical to Figure 5).

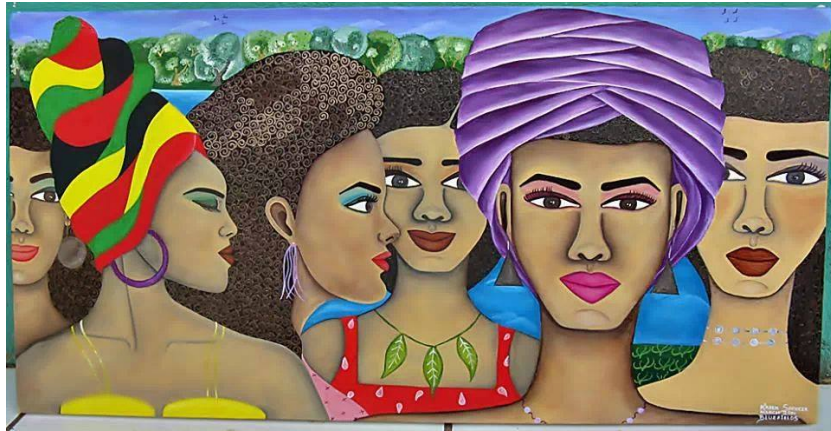
Figure 5, for example, maps the head (and hair) of an Afro-Nicaraguan woman over the entire Nicaraguan nation and makes sure her gaze is focused upon the Caribbean. This painting works in two distinct yet related ways. On the one hand, it can be read as a reminder of Afro-Nicaraguan women's centrality to and role in the development of the Nicaraguan nation despite representations of blackness as foreign; on the other hand, it demonstrates black women's gaze, alignment, and creative escape towards the Caribbean while still recognizing their rootedness in and contributions to Nicaragua.

It would be a mistake, however, to interpret Spencer's visual archive as merely a politics of recognition seeking an ever-elusive belonging to the nation-state as discussed by Iton above. It is true that under a neoliberal era, culture becomes the domain of market entry and some form of national status. It is also true that Spencer's work is part of the small tourist art market on the Caribbean coast and that Spencer at times uses

commoditized forms of black diasporic culture in her paintings. My concern here is less about how to trouble the idea of resistance or doing my best to resist uncritical celebrations of black women's art. Rather, it is more about how even under a perpetual state of contradiction and possible co-optation, Creole artists and Creole women, specifically, make room in their work for a politics of opacity. This sort of opaque cultural politics via continuous reference to historical and contemporary ties to the Anglophone Caribbean may lead to the granting of more truly autonomous rights within the Nicaraguan nation, but if not, it still presents an opportunity for black women's self-inauguration and a deeper sense of autonomy through diaspora.

By black women's self-inauguration, I am referring to a politics that goes beyond counter-hegemonic representation and social instrumentality. Rather than presenting a corrective to the state's misrepresentations of blackness and black womanhood in her paintings, Spencer comes directly up against discourses of sexual licentiousness, black foreignness, and folklorized perceptions of Creole culture by the Nicaraguan state. Spencer is less interested in any kind of respectability politics than she is in the autonomous processes of self-making, self-love, and self-celebration.





(For reference only; identical to Figure 4).

In Figure 4, for instance, Spencer presents a group of Afro-Nicaraguan women who look not only at the viewer and towards the Caribbean, but also at each other. In this painting, as in Figure 1, the majority of the canvas surface area is taken up by black women, two of them in head wraps to signify their black consciousness and connection to a larger black diaspora. One of the head wraps is colored red, gold, and green, to point specifically to the diasporic connection between the British West Indies and the Caribbean coast via Rasta iconography. The fact that the landscape is barely visible here is especially significant: it represents an abundant blackness; black womanhood; and black joy, as each woman appears contented, that refuses to be invisibilized.

## **The Music Performance of Misis Francis**

Francis Smith, better known by her performance name Misis Francis, is a dancehall/reggae artist from Bluefields who began her music career in 2004. She began singing in different festivals around town in 2004, and in 2005 decided to move to the capital of the country, Managua, for better opportunities to develop her singing career. In 2006, she began recording her first songs, and in 2008 launched her first music video. Ever since then, she has come out with multiple new songs and music videos and performs at different national venues in cities all over the country.

In recent years, Bluefields, the capital of the Southern Autonomous Region of the Caribbean coast has been dubbed the “reggae capital” of Central America. This branding can in part be credited to the Bluefields Sound System (BSS), a non-profit recording studio co-founded by two Americans in 2005 dedicated to the preservation and promotion of indigenous and Afro-descendant music from the Coast, as well as organized concerts hosting internationally celebrated reggae and dancehall artists like Mr. Vegas (2013 and 2016) and RDX (2015). Since its inauguration, BSS has opened a multi-media resource center, managed workshops, produced professional albums for Bluefields musicians, and expanded to neighboring communities. With the help of BSS, a few musicians have emerged on the music scene in Bluefields, including the contemporary Bluefields musicians Kali Boom and Papa Bantam. These artists have what could be considered a dancehall sound aesthetic, as many of their tracks feature repetitive dancehall riddims with one to two note melody voiceovers.

The fact that there has been a recent push to legitimize Afro-Caribbean roots and

culture on the Caribbean coast does not necessarily signify a shift away from the history of communication between the Coast and the Anglophone Caribbean, but instead is reflective of the effects of the mestizo nationalist Nicaraguan state. Creoles, among other groups on the Coast, feel compelled to assert an “authentic” and “traditional” Creole-ness which secures their place in the Afro-Caribbean and larger black diaspora not because of any sudden rupture or (dis)communication but because they have felt the influence of Nicaragua’s mestizo nationalist tentacles for far too long. In light of historic mestizo nationalism which has physically and ideologically encroached on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, it comes as no surprise that Creoles would increasingly be taking up a black diasporic politics in the contemporary moment.

Also taking up these diasporic politics is Misis Francis, who did not necessarily have the help of the Bluefields Sound System. Yet, her music performance is an important contribution to the masculinist music scene in Bluefields and forms part of this larger fugitive project of Caribbean diasporic blackness in the face of Nicaraguan state racism. In order to examine how Misis Francis’s music performance diverges from the patriarchal, mestizo-signified nation, I take up an analysis of the ways in which body, space, and language work in her music performance, specifically in her song and music video “Eso Me Tienta/That Tempts Me.”



Figure 6.



Figure 7.

This 2015 dancehall hit flips the script on the traditional hegemonic representations of male sexuality in dancehall culture. The video opens with Misis Francis walking up the steps to an orange-themed PlayHouse suite at the Grand Motel New York in Managua, Nicaragua, in which a muscular, phenotypically white man awaits her entrance on the suite's bed (Figures 6 and 7). The first line sung is “tú me tientas, meng/you tempt me, man” during a close-up shot of Misis Francis, followed by the song's chorus “Eso me tienta, eso me tienta, eso me tienta—lo veo y me tienta x2/that tempts me, that tempts me, that tempts me—I see it and it tempts me” set to a backdrop of a racially mixed group (black and mestiza) of six women entering a gym, presumably in Managua as well. The lyrics go on to describe the sexual temptation that arises when the desired male subject stands nearby and Misis Francis and the other women are able to “[ver] lo que [tiene]/see what he has.” They call him with a “ven, pa/come, pa” and mention that it is his turn to “menear con ese movimiento, bway/dance with that movement, boy” as the camera zooms in on the male subject's stomach as he dances. Misis Francis then sings, “no vayas a parar, si lo haces me voy a enojar... ahorita no voy a acabar—despues, despues, respek/do not stop, if you do I will get angry...right now I am not going to finish—later, later, respect.”

After this, the lyrics more or less repeat, set to the backdrop of more gym shots of both the group of women and the object of desire, as well as of shots of Misis Francis in the hotel suite about to consummate her sexual desires with the male subject. At 2:20 into the song, which up to this point has been entirely in Spanish with the exception of a couple Creole words and expressions thrown in like “bway,” “respek,” and “see it deh,” Misis Francis has an entire verse in Creole, saying: “You know, comin out big... After I dun fire, me wicked, you no see it? Me wicked, you know?... you done know...back to Fiuhrrer Records, you see it? DJ [Fit] in yo house.” This verse marks the end of the song and video.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which Misis Fransis provides a critique of hegemonic structures of oppression is the way in which she transgresses masculinist dancehall culture at a local level. Jarret Brown (1999) has written about the ways in which virile male sexuality in dancehall culture is front and center, functioning “as a charismatic voice that objectifies the woman and her body as a site of sadistic pleasure in the sex act. In this case, sex becomes a ritual for asserting, initiating and producing manhood.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, in Misis Francis’s “Eso Me Tienta,” she asserts her own form of sexual pleasure and agency, in addition to engaging constructions of black sexuality and femininity as well as comically flipping the script on who gets objectified. This flipping of the script can be read not only as an assertion of erotic desire but also as an assertion of power over the white mestizo male subject and the larger patriarchal mestizo nationalist state.

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<sup>19</sup> Jarrett Brown, “Masculinity and Dancehall,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 45 (1999): 5.

It is important to remember the ways in which Misis Francis speaks back to the gendered forms of Nicaraguan state racism, not unlike gendered racism rooted in black women's sexual exploitation during slavery elsewhere, in which the stereotypes about black women's sexuality has worked to create a silence around black women's pleasure and agency over their own lives and bodies. Afro-Caribbean black feminist theorist and hip hop feminist Joan Morgan has urged us to take up a black feminist politics of pleasure that takes seriously the question: "how can deepening our understanding of the multivalent ways black women produce, read and participate in pleasure complicate our understanding of black female subjectivities in ways that invigorate, inform, and sharpen a contemporary black feminist agenda?"<sup>20</sup> With this question in mind, I am more interested in dancehall music performance as wielding agentive oppositional power and politics for black women, even as a contested and contradictory site operating under patriarchal, capitalist culture and consumerism.

This query motivates this paper's investigation into the way Misis Francis, as well as Spencer Downs, mobilize the question of black women's sexuality and pleasure in response to gendered racism, but also to assert sexual agency and pleasure beyond social instrumentality. One way Misis Francis negotiates these questions is through her embodied experience as a black woman. Throughout the video, both the lyrics and visuals center around her and her own desires and pleasure. We see Misis Francis dancing throughout, lounging on a recliner in a corset, strutting with confidence, and in general unabashedly

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<sup>20</sup> Joan Morgan, "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure," *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* 45, no. 4 (2015): 1.

addressing her sexual desire. In many ways, this song and video, like the work of other female dancehall artists, “encourages female agency and supports Caribbean women’s popular sexual pleasure.”<sup>21</sup>

It is quite significant, given the history of national representations of black women from the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, that Misis Francis, a dark-skinned black woman from Bluefields, is able to express a black feminist performance of pleasure on a national scale. By challenging hegemonic notions of proper [black] female behavior, Misis Francis provides a visual framework through which black women’s sexuality can be popularly imagined in Nicaragua beyond a narrative of pain. Even as some will read hypersexuality upon viewing the video, seemingly reifying existing notions about black women in Nicaragua, Misis Francis sings and performs despite this, strategically winning over representational space in Nicaragua to be one of the first black women artists in the country to stand for a black feminist politics of pleasure. Like Spencer’s paintings, Misis Francis’ unapologetic expression of her sexuality and her blackness intersect to face the media and the state square in the face and to say that she is not sacrificing her pleasure due to the racist and sexist tropes she is up against.

Space is instrumental to this black feminist politics of pleasure in Nicaragua and in Misis Francis’s strategic moves. Not only does she interrupt the male-dominated music and dancehall scenes in Bluefields and on a national scale, but she also disturbs the mestizo-identified national imaginary of the country through her national success. Her entry into

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<sup>21</sup> Karen Flynn, “Moving Dancehall Off the Island: Female Sexuality and Club Culture in Toronto,” *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies: A Journal of Caribbean Perspectives on Gender and Feminism* 8 (2014): 200.

the Pacific as a popular artist is especially symbolic due to the ways in which the Caribbean coast has been racialized in the national imaginary as black even though Creoles represent only ten percent of the Coast population today.<sup>22</sup> What does it mean to have a Creole woman not only singing on a national scale, but singing dancehall of all genres—one which is decidedly black and particularly Afro-Caribbean? The riddim that Misis Francis sings over in “Eso Me Tienta” is originally a whine and kotch dancehall riddim, specifically as rendered by dancehall artist JayH featuring dancehall DJ Quinna, both from Amsterdam but of Afro-Caribbean descent, in their song “Claimen.” In every one of her songs, Misis Francis sings over dancehall riddims, whether borrowed or produced originally by her producers at Fiuhrrer Records.

The nation is confronted once again not only with the reality of its black citizens but also their historic links to the British West Indies, which has always been seen as a threat to nationalism and national unity by the Nicaraguan state. Rather than a folkloric blackness which the state can appropriate and reference in order to mark blackness as something past and distant, dancehall music is a very contemporary and political genre. In addition to Misis Francis and dancehall’s entrance into the Pacific coast of Nicaragua, there is also the question of language. Despite the fact that for economic profit and survival purposes Misis Francis must market herself nationally and appeal to all audiences in Nicaragua, she makes sure to slip in some phrases and an entire verse in Nicaraguan Creole.

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<sup>22</sup> Juliet Hooker, “Race and the Space of Citizenship: The Mosquito Coast and the Place of Blackness and Indigeneity in Nicaragua,” *Blacks and Blackness in Central America: Between Race and Place*. Lowell Gudmundson and Justin Wolfe, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).



This ostensibly works to root herself in the Caribbean coast and remind audiences about who she is and where she comes from.

Upon reflecting on these negotiations, it seems that dancehall is an especially useful site to wage a politics of black feminist pleasure and assert a black Caribbean diasporic belonging in the face of gendered, anti-black racism. This is both because of the sexual politics addressed head-on in the genre as well as its emergence as a black Caribbean music form in the early 1980s. The signifiers of a black Caribbean belonging are present not only in Misis Francis's engagement in the genre and with black women's sexual and linguistic politics in Nicaragua, but also in the stylistic choices she makes to adorn herself in the colors red, gold, and green in both her clothing and head wraps.



Figure 8.

(For reference only; identical to Figure 6).

In “Eso Me Tienta,” for example, the red, gold, and green make an appearance in her hair highlights (Figure 6).

This visual archive of black diaspora identification from both Misis Francis and Spencer Downs appropriates national discourses about black sexuality and black outsider status to the Nicaraguan nation. While the Nicaraguan state has historically perpetuated

these discourses to eschew the extension of full citizenship rights to black Nicaraguans as it imagines itself as a mestizo nation, by the same token, the far-reaching historical moments in which Creoles have emphasized a black diasporic identity and politics has always posed a threat to nationalist state power. It is from this vantage point that I propose Creole diasporic cultural politics of opacity may be a strategy to obtain distinct cultural, political, and material rights based off this counter-national threat. In many ways, Creoles using this strategy would join the ranks of various black diasporic communities in Latin America and the Caribbean that have used the normative national terms available to them, such as racial democracy in Brazil and rights associated with overseas department status in Guadeloupe, to challenge and unsettle what is truly meant by contemporary notions of democracy, sovereignty, multiculturalism, and autonomy, in an effort to reform and reap the benefits of what they could mean.<sup>23</sup>

Rather than merely presenting a corrective to the state's misrepresentations of blackness and black womanhood, however, both Misis Francis through her music performance and Spencer Downs through her visual art on Creole women come up with their own conceptions of black womanhood on their own terms. I acknowledge the ways in which discourses of self-love and self-care are always already operating under neoliberal forces that make any analysis of them more complicated. But these processes are important nonetheless as black women attempt to work through the existing terms of order to fashion something new. Misis Francis and Spencer Downs recuperate, or rather inaugurate, a

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<sup>23</sup> See Paulina Alberto, *Terms of Inclusion: Black Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Yarimar Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

politics and language of pleasure that has been direly needed to discuss black women's sexualities. This has become increasingly difficult to do in the wake of historical tropes about their inherent sexual pathology.

In a similar vein to contemporary black feminist thought engaging black women's sexuality and pleasure as more than a site of reoccurring trauma, I take seriously pleasure as theory and praxis with political implications, and read black women's cultural production as more than just "a representation politic that routinely discounts *black female interiority* [author's emphasis]." <sup>24</sup> It is precisely this interiority, following Elizabeth Alexander's understanding of interiority as a site that "helps us envision what we are not meant to envision," that I am concerned with in discussing both Misis Francis's and Spencer Downs's politics of self-inauguration.

The black interior encompasses not only mental, spiritual, and psychological expression, but a "broad range of feelings, desires, yearning, (erotic and otherwise) that were once deemed necessarily private by the 'politics of silence.'" <sup>25</sup> Alexander poses some important questions in her thinking through the black interior that are relevant to the arguments I make here. They are: 1) "What do we learn when we pause at sites of contradiction where black creativity complicates and resists what blackness is 'supposed' to be?; and 2) What in our culture speaks, sustains, and survives, post-nationalism, post-racial romance, into the unwritten black future we must imagine?" <sup>26</sup> For the purposes of this

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<sup>24</sup> Joan Morgan, "Why We Get Off," 3.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

essay and the arguments made here, one possible answer to this set of questions seems to be the relationship between black women's pleasure, or at least erotic autonomy, and culture and politics. In response to these questions, with the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua in mind, I in turn ask how the erotic, both in terms of sexuality and the desire for a fuller humanity, figures in Spencer Downs's visual art and in Misis Francis's music performance? To contend with this question might lead us to important ways to think racial-cultural autonomy on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua anew.

## Conclusion

Given the ways black women's interiority and pleasure figures so heavily in black women's cultural production from the visual to the embodied and the sonic, expressive culture proves to be a particularly apt site through which to imagine new erotic possibilities, in the broadest sense, for both black women and black people more generally. Given the opaque nature of Creole women's cultural production in its illegibility (read: blackness and black women's sexuality) to the state, it is also an ideal site in terms of the relative privacy or autonomy with which political and erotic negotiations can be made. This is not to say that Creole women are not also working through the formally political to achieve some semblance of justice, rights, and emancipation, but that black cultural spheres allow for more radical, more transformative, and perhaps more opaque forms of resistance and political organizing.

Both the move towards diaspora identification and the making of this move through artistic production represents, as Iton notes, an "anaformative impulse" and black politics "as anarrangement" and "anaformality."<sup>27</sup> This is to say that diaspora maintains an agonistic approach to and an interest in exceeding the scripts of modernity, such as the nation-state. Diasporic politics as seen through black women's expressive culture here has the power to center gender and sexuality and thus not only exceed national boundaries but challenge the hetero-patriarchal premise of the nation-state. This gendered critique is accomplished through a politics of opacity, but one that centers black women's interiority

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<sup>27</sup> Iton, "Still Life," 39.

and erotic desire in diasporic identification rather than a masculinist form of diasporic identification.

Black women's expressive culture is not only illegible to the state given the state's disavowal of aesthetics and culture as politics, then, but in the radical difference from the mestizo signified nation and the (gendered) diasporic identification with the Anglophone Caribbean. This opaque field of play, one that is both illegible and threatening to the white supremacist, hetero-patriarchal, mestizo nationalist Nicaraguan state, reveals some possibility of working towards a truly decolonial politics without any prescriptions for what the future will look like. This is in the spirit of a true politics of opacity that, following Iton's lead, must always be cautious and opaque even in the process of imagining new futures given the dangers of the political imaginary in reproducing structures of oppression. Yet, it is Creole women's cultural politics of deep interiority and opacity, I argue, that can best aid in visions of what could be.

While Creole investment in politics and the formally political via the cultural realm has had less to do with a choice and more to do with violent and exclusionary practices throughout history, the opacity of the cultural realm proves to be useful not only because of the subversive qualities of hidden transcripts, but also because its exclusion from and disinvestment in the formally political does mean that expressive culture and cultural politics are particularly well positioned to challenge and perhaps refrain from reinscribing the dominant scripts of coloniality/modernity in the quest for alternative, more emancipatory futures. As recent scholarship suggests, art and cultural production allows for a staging or at least an exploration of different political possibilities without necessarily

having to face the repercussions of a failed political project.<sup>28</sup> In this way, cultural production provides space for the enactment of possible future modes of living and being. This brings us back to the central question posed from the outset of this essay: What might attention to Afro-Nicaraguan women's expressive culture elucidate about the relationship between rights and culture, particularly when it comes to imagining and engendering alternative futures? Or, to put it differently, what work does a women-led, black diasporic cultural politics of opacity do in the Afro-Nicaraguan context?

I have argued here that what allows Spencer and Misis Francis to forge a larger Caribbean alliance and diasporic belonging is a politics of opacity that characterizes their cultural production focused on black women and black women's erotic autonomy. This politics of opacity, as it operates through Creole women's expressive culture, may allow for some decolonial possibilities in the Afro-Nicaraguan context. These include: 1) a cultural politics of autonomy beyond the nation state in the face of state racism, often through an appropriation of racist national discourses about Afro-Nicaraguans, 2) the use of both the counter-national threat posed by diaspora identification and inadequate national terms such as multiculturalism and autonomy in order to secure distinct cultural, political, and material rights, and 3) an autonomous/private politics of self-inauguration that centers black women's desire and pleasure in order to think what racial-cultural autonomy could look like on the Coast anew.

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<sup>28</sup> See Jeremy Glick, *The Black Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetics, and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Erica Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

This last point is particularly important, given the ways in which discourses of both national inclusion and of autonomy for Afro-Nicaraguans have failed and continue to fail in centering the experiences of black women. For example, national laws passed to prevent violence against women continually fail to analyze the specific ways in which black (and indigenous) women face racialized gender violence. Likewise, discussions of autonomy occurring both in the central government and among black and indigenous leaders on the Coast very rarely take into account erotic autonomy or what it might mean to center black women's and other marginal groups' desires for a better life in constructions of autonomy laws and amendments. However, via a symbolic mode of autonomy—that is, diasporic identification with the Anglophone Caribbean via cultural production—black women on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast are and have been taking matters into their own hands. Not only are they centering their own racialized and gendered experiences, pleasure, and erotic (in the broadest sense) desires, but in doing so, this radical interiority or cultural politics of (black women's) opacity challenges the mestizo nationalist, hetero-patriarchal Nicaraguan state. Perhaps, under the current terms of order, this is the most radical, decolonial form of politics and political organizing for an alternative future.



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